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JOINT INSPECTION UNIT

PERSONNEL QUESTIONS

Advantages and disadvantages of the post classification system

Note by the Secretary-General

Addendum

The Secretary-General has the honour to submit to the General Assembly his comments on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Advantages and disadvantages of the post classification system" (A/47/168).

* A/47/50.

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Comments of the Secretary-General

General

1. The Secretary-General believes that the report has fulfilled its goal of providing a comprehensive reference document containing valuable information on the background, development and implementation of post classification in the United Nations common system along with underlining both the advantages and disadvantages of the concept and suggesting possible improvements in its application. Particularly useful is an overview of classification procedures in the United Nations Secretariat and 12 specialized agencies.

2. The primary objective of post classification is to determine the relative value of jobs within an organization to ensure that jobs of equivalent value are graded at the same level and are competitive, in terms of remuneration, with comparable jobs in the outside market. The report confirmed that there was broad acceptance, among the organizations surveyed, of the function and usefulness of post classification as a tool in ensuring equitable grading and remuneration practices. However, broader purposes served by post classification, such as its usefulness as a tool in programme and human resource planning, remained to be exploited and incorporated within the overall management programmes of the organizations.

3. The major area of concern identified in the report was the absence of career development schemes, owing to which job classification is widely perceived as the sole vehicle for promotion. This is especially true in periods of financial austerity. Post reclassification is often regarded as an alternative to promotions, which results in heavy pressure being placed on classifiers to upgrade posts, while the introduction of personal promotion systems has often given rise to such problems as inequity in remuneration for the same job.

4. The Secretary-General welcomes the recommendations made in the report, which are aimed at improving the transparency and efficiency of the post classification system, and notes that they coincide with those made by the Subcommittee on Job Classification of the Consultative Committee on Administrative Questions and endorsed by the Consultative Committee at its last session, in March 1992 (ACC/1992/Per/R.10 of 13 January 1992).

Recommendation 1

5. At present, the United Nations Secretariat has four full-time Classification Officers (two P-4, one P-3 and one P-2) who, under the supervision of the Deputy Chief of the Compensation and Classification Service, are responsible for the formulation and development of classification policies in the Secretariat and for regular classification activities in respect of approximately 10,000 posts at all duty stations of the United Nations. Other common system organizations normally have one Classification Officer for every 1,000 to 1,500 posts. This discrepancy not only results in

undesirable delays in processing classification actions but also seriously limits the time available for more proactive functions such as job design and training.

6. To overcome this problem, measures are under review to streamline the classification process. One option is to identify opportunities for the preparation of standard rather than individual job descriptions. In one such recent exercise, the number of job descriptions covering the 189 security posts at Headquarters was reduced from 80 to 21. This has obvious benefits both for programme managers in eliminating redundant paperwork and for the mapping of career paths, as the information to be evaluated is both reduced and more clearly defined in terms of the nature and levels of work. While the development of standard descriptions for the Security Category was relatively straightforward, given the marked similarity of jobs at each level, it is believed that there are similar opportunities for the preparation of standard job descriptions in other organizational units and, in some cases, across organizational units. Although their preparation can be time-consuming in the short run as care must be taken to inventory jobs properly in order to ensure that the nature of the work is the same, the benefits to be gained from the standpoint of administrative convenience, transparency of grade levels and career planning are significant.

7. Another option considered is to delegate some of the responsibilities for job classification to Executive Offices. Under the current system, the classification analysis of a post is conducted by two Classification Officers. The recommendations of the Classification Officers are then submitted for approval to the Chief of Service and to the Assistant Secretary-General for Human Resources Management through the Director, Staff Administration and Training Division. If sufficient availability of classification expertise in all Executive Offices is established, it may become possible to delegate the first review of a classification request to the relevant Executive/Administrative Officer. To facilitate such an arrangement, workshops and other forms of practical training in the area of post classification for selected staff of these offices would be organized. As the operation of a partially decentralized system of post classification would require careful review to establish the necessary modalities, a pilot project in this area would be required.

Recommendation 2

8. Measures are being taken in the recommended direction. In conjunction with the implementation of classification systems for the General Service category at major overseas duty stations, the Compensation and Classification Service of the Secretariat has undertaken training missions to brief management and staff on the concepts of job classification and the preparation of job descriptions. Such a training mission was recently completed at Nairobi in cooperation with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Personnel Officers serving as focal points for the implementation of classification systems at overseas duty stations have also been brought to Headquarters for training in the application of classification standards and procedures. Similar projects are envisaged for the future.

Recommendation 3

9. This recommendation is welcomed. It should be noted that, further to a feasibility study carried out by UNDP and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), these two agencies are currently completing the design of an automated system for application of the Master Standard for Classification of Professional posts. In accordance with the work programme endorsed by the Subcommittee on Job Classification of the Consultative Committee on Administrative Questions at its last session, a detailed software development plan for implementation of this system, together with cost estimates, is to be completed in early 1993.

Recommendation 4

10. As the report does not elaborate on this recommendation, the basis for it is not clear. While clearly the views of programme managers are indispensable to the selection process, final recommendations on the appointment and promotion of staff are, under the United Nations Staff Rules, entrusted to appointment and promotion bodies composed of representatives of both the administration and the staff.

Recommendation 5

11. The Secretary-General is considering possible arrangements such as those discussed in paragraphs 6 and 7 above in order to enhance the transparency and acceptance of the classification standards and their application by programme managers and staff at large.

Recommendation 6

12. The Secretary-General supports this recommendation, which is in keeping with current United Nations practice. He notes, however, that it is somewhat at odds with the tenor of recommendation 10.

Recommendation 7

13. The appeals machinery is already established in the Secretariat.

Recommendation 8

14. The Secretary-General believes that the system of national competitive examinations serves the purpose of attracting qualified staff at entry levels.

Recommendation 9

15. While jobs in certain fields of work can be redesigned at lower levels, their redesign must be based, first and foremost, on the programme mandate and structural configuration of the office concerned. The artificial redesign of a post for recruitment or promotion purposes may hamper rather than enhance programme delivery. From the standpoint of career development, the "scaling

down" of posts, in periods of zero growth, will limit promotion opportunities for existing staff. As such, the Secretary-General is of the view that this recommendation requires careful review and should take into account the concept and modalities for "underfilling of posts" by the International Civil Service Commission in its paper on promotion policy (ICSC/18/R.24).

Recommendation 10

16. As defined by the International Civil Service Commission, 1/ "linked grades" provide for the application of the salary scales of two or more grades to a position whose value to the organization is equal to that of only one of the grades. The Commission has stated that the use of linked grades is an approach inconsistent with the concept of post classification as it undermines the principle of "equal pay for equal work".

17. As described by the Inspector, a linked grade approach would consist of "one entry grade in which the incumbent would stay for a given probationary period, and then the formal grade of the post as classified, which would only be given on certain conditions". This is not strictly a "linked grade" approach, as the classified level of the post is maintained. The Commission, in its 1983 paper on promotion policy (ICSC/18/R.24), indicated that such an approach may be justified in cases where it is not possible or not desirable, for reasons such as geographical distribution, to fill a post at the full performance level, provided the duties and responsibilities of the post are adjusted, the requirements to reach the full level are clearly defined and the transition period does not exceed one year.

18. The Commission has also indicated that the institution of a personal promotion policy may be justified, on an exceptional basis, to remunerate fairly staff members whose value to the organization exceeds that of the classified level of the job they perform. To be credible, however, personal promotion systems require the development of strict criteria, which must be rigorously applied. In order not to distort the post classification system and jeopardize the comparison of salaries, the Commission has further recommended that the use of personal promotions be restricted to either 5 per cent of the established posts at a given level or to the percentage of the average vacancy rate at that level, whichever is less.

Notes

1/ Official Records of the General Assembly, Thirty-seventh Session, Supplement No. 30 (A/37/30), annex I, appendix II, para. 26.